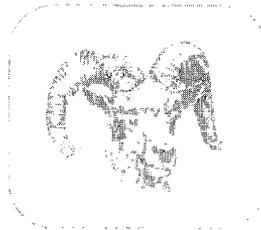


THE ABALONE HEART

by
Barbara Meyn



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For Harry

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NOTE: A centered asterisk indicates the poem has been broken mid-stanza.

Barbara Meyn, an Introduction

William Stafford once turned the tables on a supercilious critic who tried to belittle him by calling him “regional.” “Being tagged a ‘regional artist’ didn’t hurt much,” Stafford wrote, for, after all, every artist must maintain “the knack for responding to the immediate, the region . . . that’s where art is. . . . That’s the ground for their art, the place where they live.”

An earlier poet held a similar idea. According to Henry David Thoreau, the poems arise from the very ground the poet stands on.

And now, with the publication of *The Abalone Heart*, still another American poet, Barbara Meyn, makes the point again. Her poems, some of which range as far as any of us could throw a question, do indeed rise from the very local ground she walks: the little path, say, wriggling from the broken-down wicker chair, her favorite observation post for keeping track of the life going on in the woods, back through a small plantation of seedlings in one-gallon cans and odd little stacks of short lengths of boards and two-by-fours that might come in handy some time, and up to the backdoor of the cluttered little house where she lives with her musician husband, Harry Meyn. The importance of the place where she walks is not in her footprints, which are very much like anyone else’s; it is in the genuineness of the work that comes out of the place, a genuineness which grows out of the care with which this poet takes in this place. It is the work of one whose quick eyes see what others ignore, and whose contemplative mind sees connections among those seen things and between them and the whole ranging universe of human endeavor.

I am talking here about a principle of composition, one so amazingly simple it is hard to understand why it is so hard to understand: it is the concrete—not the abstract—that convinces us we are dealing with something real; and it is discovered connections that make the real things significant.

How far back must we go to get a sense of the history of our trying to teach this to ourselves? In English poetry, every master poet, from Chaucer to the present, demonstrates this principle, so, to save time, let us settle for one authority, a Chinese poet and scholar of the Eleventh Century, one Wei T’Ai, translated by A. C. Graham:

Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling, for as soon as the mind responds and connects with the thing, the feeling shows in the words; this is how poetry enters deeply into use.

Barbara Meyn’s title poem, “The Abalone Heart,” is not the best poem in the volume, but, like all the others, it shows what a master this poet is of the principle mentioned above. Abalone shells, some of them as big as hubcaps,

This is the way poems often begin for her, Meyn says: first, an observation; second, reflections and a few scribbled lines. Then the work begins—revisions—up to thirty or forty of them according to her count (and mine). Mother-of-pearl is not made overnight either. It takes a lot of heart.

The Abalone Heart is Barbara Meyn's only book since her first volume, ***Blue Heron on Humbug Creek***, in 1981.

These poems take Marianne Moore's famous demand for "a place for the genuine," a step further. Moore asked for "real toads in imaginary gardens"; Meyn provides real toads in real gardens—toads and gardens made both real and significant by her stubborn insistence on seeing what's there and her hard-won skill of using the precise, the concrete, and the local to illuminate and acknowledge the evanescent, the ineffable, the undefined.

D. L. Emblen
Santa Rosa, California
August, 1988

Part I
Crossroads

Crossroads

(for Blanche Brown)

When heat shimmers across the fields she remembers
climbing a fence to watch them walk by,
overallled men looking straight ahead,
long-skirted women, baskets on their backs
laden with babies, blankets, acorn meal.
They came from Sanel and traveled to the coast
to gather seaweed, abalones, clams.
Following roads that eclipsed their deep-worn paths,
they camped along the way. Tonight they'd sleep
at Grandfather's, lying down with delight
in the green clover field by Big Spring,
plucking and munching the tart stems and leaves.
The women would spread cloths under the oaks
to catch acorns they knocked down with sticks.
Cloths full and tied, they'd rest on the porch
while the men solemnly gathered, speaking low,
waiting for Grandfather and his burlap bag
to come from the garden. Their dark eyes
would follow him as he rolled ripe melons out
and cut them up. They'd smiled as the sweet juice
dribbled down their chins. "Good, Bee-ll!"
they'd say as they spat the seeds. Or merely "Bee-ll!"
in a fond voice as they drifted off to camp.
He often said it was a poor trade,
a few melons, a night in a clover field
for the rich, free life that they had known.

Maybe they'd stay to work for a day or two.
More often they'd leave next day, expecting
an abalone tide, going their way
while he went his, cutting hay, picking
apples and corn, an Indiana boy
who'd wagoned west as far as he could go
and settled down. Sometimes his own eyes followed
the people of Sanel as if he wanted
to chuck it all and walk with them to the sea.

The Day the Drought Ended

Step by crooked step
I make my way into the creek's bed
where it sang so loud last winter.
Sponge of detritus
laced by roots and rocks,
parched bank furrowed, gray.
A lizard skitters off.
At bottom, bedrock.
How many searching rains it took
to find a truth that dry.

I lean to touch
upended boulders whose tremendous
water-rolling trembled me at night.
Tympani strewn careless in a pit,
the player gone. I climb back up
with music in my head.

February on the Mountain

Alder's wind-mauled catkins
rub their furry backs against blue sky
while earth still huddles
under last week's coat of snow.
All's bare and strange, the indigo
naked, frail, its summer leaflets gone.
Manzanita bears a few
waxy, heart-shaped buds like embryos.
Spring wounds me with her buds. Why do I
cling to every sign of her rebirth?

Petals in the snow, half-frozen
roses bigger than my fist.
I place my fingers in the print
of the predator who comes to breathe
cold breath upon my neck in dreams:
winter, with its cougar eyes,
silent, watchful, deadly, merciful.

The Change

I note the classic signs: anxiety,
body's thermostat gone mad.
It's not the sweat I mind
but the long chill that follows.
And this indignity: I'm helpless
as a pregnant woman. Children
came alive in that dark cell. Now
age stirs its fragile bones.

What will it be, this wrinkled babe?
It will have my eyes, but shall I
recognize its hair?
And who will want it in his bed
on even the coldest night?
It may inherit something of my mind,
but O the discipline it must endure.

A Stone for My Father

Sitting across from me at the breakfast table,
his hair as silver as my mother's rings,
he tells about the good times:
gathering agates on the beach,
coming back to the trailer in the evening,
sitting with my mother, sorting stones.
Her piano sits in the rock room under plastic,
its laughter and its fury silenced. The cup
trembles in his hands.
I think about the years he spent with her,
second husband, honest but rough-spoken,
fisherman to her fire-opal moods.

Gradually he sifts through the rubble
of a marriage that, if not quite happy, lasted.
I wonder if it often comes to this,
talking with someone in a sheltered space
while you sort whatever stones you've gathered,
turn them one by one, note their color,
weigh them in your hands, and give them names.

Again

Earth revolves. We on the daystar side
grip her like animals,
cling to our mother's fur, afraid
she'll shake us off at the next turn.
She has places to go, appointments with planets.
We are only her latest litter.
However we try we can never be as
all-sufficient as she, can never
possess that lovely horizon,
that interstellar glow, those magnificent
blue depths swarming with life.

We hesitate to feel for beginnings.
What worlds can we become? Shall we
toss our children aside so casually?

In Sheep's Clothing

You are surprised that I'm a Leo.
I see—as if some English inn
with weak tea and lumpy beds
masqueraded under the royal sign.

But think of all the lions that there are:
patient ones with dull coats
islanded in zoos, in rings,
cowed by whips and ordinary chairs;
lionesses programed by the pride,
compelled to hunt but giving up the catch;
she-cougars traveling by night,
alone in the remotest places.

Looking through heavy bars, my Aries friend,
I wonder whether I could let you out,
race you to the cliffs to feel the wind
and contemplate the world from a new height.
What do you suddenly see in my eyes
that makes you so afraid?

Beware Blackberries Bearing Gifts

Reaping what I once unwisely sowed,
I hoe what threatens to invade my garden,
undermine the road, and rule the world.
I can't believe I nursed this vine
through all those years of drought.
It first began to thrive
the year I found its fruit all but inedible.

This serpent in our Eden marks my arms
not with its juice but with my blood.
Its runners grip like death.
Only my glasses save my eyes. My breath
fast as Laocoon's, grappling with snakes,
I fight appalling life, afraid
to call a truce until the last
stubborn root is wrestled from the ground.

Ghosts

Yesterday we cut the apple tree.
I was surprised to see
its insect-riddled wood
amounted to a single pickup load.
I'd thought a thing
that filled its living space with such solidity
would last us till the spring,
that what made tons of memorable fruit, tart-sweet,
would give an equal heat.

Though it's but a stump, knee-high,
I image it with leaves against the sky,
see in the moving cloud
of smoke above my morning fire a shroud
of blossoms. Will the deer
look for windfalls here again next year?

Walking in October Woods

Because the only changeless law is change
we know even love can't stay the same.
A planet born in fire cools
to livability. Life tries
one form for an age and then,
when climates fail, trades it for another.
After all his false beginnings man
came down from trees, walked upright,
joined the tribe. His summer
may have seemed as wonderful as ours,
game plentiful, seeds ripe, berries
rich on the tongue as lovers' kisses.

Delivered from necessity we walk
October woods, collecting winter fuel.
A fire tonight, a fire in the morning—
it doesn't matter. We survive
on memory of warmth as much
as on the heat of fire itself.

Dividing Line

After a day of unexpected warmth
we drive north again to see
if summer still lingers by the river.
The heat is real enough, but sun
goes earlier. Maples light their leaves
among the evergreens. There is
new carpet on the forest floor.

Scrambling down the bluff we find
the bridge is out and wade to the beach
through water colder by a few degrees.
Phoebes we knew as friends all summer
regard us now as strangers here
long past normal visiting hours.
Soon the gnomon of the canyon wall
catches us with shadow on the sand.
We shiver, wading back to reality.
A heron rises, putting miles
between himself and us.
Under tanbarks in deserted camps
deer browse and gaze with distant eyes.

We eat in the dark, alone
within the lantern's narrow glow,
crawl into our bags and fall asleep.
Wake to the quiet drip of mist
and lie there till the sun comes out
to gild the red berries of madrone.
A maple leaf detaches at the stem
and slowly spirals down.
How difficult it is to find
the line between one season and another.
How difficult to document a leaf
before it fades into winter ground.

Something Like November

We put down our tools and stop to rest.
Now that the bowsaw's rasp has ceased,
how still it is. Dusty light
filters through the trees. The forest
listens for a sound
small and far away as rain.

A winter wren slips in and out of shadow.
Light as a leaf, a hermit thrush
flutters to the ground.
He cocks his tail, then lowers it,
instinctive movement that confirms
what kind of thrush he is. And he—
what does he think of us?
That something like November in our blood
compels us to gather our own wood?

Over the Pass

No place to go but down,
we say it will be
easy now, only a short romp home.
Lift each foot, let it fall
forward with gravity.
Finish the rations,
empty the canteen.
Tonight we'll sleep
in a soft bed, and clean.

And shall we dream
of clear streams and lakes,
of herons in canyons?
The smell of kit-kit-dizze
and the blue of penstemon?

We rest in the shade
to measure the effect
of so much walking, then
shoulder our empty packs,
taking a last look around.

Part II
Medicine Bundle

Medicine Bundle

1. Skin of Mole

This midnight moonlight fur—
reversed, a wrinkled brown
paper bag still bloodstained
where the juice leaked through.
Salty smell of flesh,
stiff snout intact,
double strand of teeth
like grains of silica.
Outfacing palms a parody
of mismatched gloves.
Helpless as a toy on earth,
it slips like velvet
through its runs below.
Eyeless, earless though it looks
to my flawed vision, and its brain
paid back to the dark,
it watches, listens. May
its progeny be nourished by
the worm that feeds on me.

2. Bone of Bird

I eat another animal.
Before me, cleansed of flesh,
its neckbones lie,
assuming new identity: a pack
of ghostly dogs, a mockery
of predators escaped,
ivory skulls with eyes of air,
sharp prongs of horn.
One broken at the snout reveals
a core like honeycomb.
I fit the puzzle of
these bones together.
Small steps of logic, they ascend
from where the body was

*

to where the brain.
I've eaten muscle,
thrown to dogs the skin
and flexible nerve cord
that made sense of these holes.
Life has become invisible.
Where has the honey gone?

3. Cocoon

What has known
the freedom of the sky
ties its hammock to a tree,
takes a cradle-basket's shape,
assumes the color of earth.
Beneath the husk
of silver-brushed dull brown,
folded wings, soft with power.
Or only an animal preserved,
cured, at rest? In my hand
it whispers emptiness.
Life has left it hanging high,
a medicine rattle in the wind.

Like Xeno's Turtle

Do you recall that first quantum leap
across the chasm of complete
unawareness of the other's life?

We have drawn close enough
to hear each other breathe.

Yet each day, no matter what we will,
life lets us cover only half
the distance that remains.

Act of Faith

When the house is quiet the stove and I
open our doors to each other and stare
into the heart of the fire.
Breathing aloud, making a few sharp taps
(unsteady bursts like old typewriter keys)
it subsides to coals, a drift of ash,
ultimate reduction of a tree.

The appetite of my small firebox
appalls me. It eats forests.
If times were hard, winter bitter,
would I feed it the oak table
that nourished me with food and talk?
Chairs whose arms held me lovingly?
Would I strip the bed
and burn its antique cherry? Rip
shelves apart, make an auto-da-fe
of Rilke, Yeats, Donne and all the rest,
Thomas Hardy blazing by Fielding's Tom,
Bible fused in a pyre with **Das Kapital?**

Only *in extremis* I'd add the flutes.
With breath as quick to flare and die as mine
they'd whisper one last pavane
to pipe the household gods back to heaven.
I'd take an axe to walls and roof and then
go down myself like Joan of Arc,
some minor witch well-versed
in ways beloved things are sacrificed
to feed an insatiable flame.

The Abalone Heart

The stubborn muscle makes up its mind,
fastens to an unresponsive rock.

Only iron pries it loose again.
Wrenched from its gritty will, thrown

helpless in a sack,
it bumps to its destiny.

The empty shell still clings
to a mother-of-pearl opinion.

After a lifetime in the dark,
far from eyes that translate light,

how does it dare to hazard
this amazing rainbow?

Swimming Stony Creek

I watch as his world closes in:
town, garden, house, his room,
the tired walls of his battered heart.
He won't go under easy. Each retreat's
a well-planned skirmish in a battle.
Ordered to wear the oxygen's long leash,
he orders more hose to make it longer.
Grimly he endures three days in a rest home
to prove to me he's better off in his own.
He takes charge of his complex medication,
three pills in the morning, five at night,
three at 1 a.m., and, in between,
the sessions on the Bird breathing machine.
He manages to recruit two old women
who come to clean house and fix meals.
One of them stands guard every night.
His line of communication's the telephone.

In spite of the close camp he's forced to keep,
he takes sudden forays into the woods.
He tells me about the time he was a boy
hiking in winter hills west of the ranch
when, rather than go back two miles to a bridge,
he tossed his rock-tied clothes to the other shore
and swam Stony Creek in January,
breaking ice with his hands at every stroke.

Ceremonial Basket

First the gathering: she digs
sedge and bulrush roots
where the river overflowed.
Cuts willow shoots and redbud
when her fingers tell her to.
She cleans, splits, coils,
finds quail topknot feathers,
abalone shell.

She waits for the dream.
Suddenly one day
her hands begin to move.
Do the wild roots
remember where they grew?
Design comes forth,
part butterfly, part snake.
It takes a long time,
from leafing out
to acorn gathering.

What will it hold?
Seeds, she says.
Clamshell beads.
An offering to God.
That is all.

Place Names

They wait for me to notice them on maps,
those little towns with names like
Eminence, New Harmony, and Hopewell.
Once I came across a place called Friend,
hardly a settlement, only a box for mail
out on a windswept Oregon plateau.
The man who lived there made canoes,
painted them with Indian designs
for folks who floated down the Crooked River.

In dreams I float halfway between
Responsibility and Freedom. The first
is solid, full of love; but it is walled.
The second's a direction, not a town—
somewhere downstream on the Lonely River.

Staying Warm

Waking early on a winter day,
thinking of warmer places I have been,
I feed the fire, trying to persuade
the mercury past sixty,
remember cold mornings when we woke
to feed the children, how our lives
revolved like two dutiful planets
around a house, a garden, and a world
I still sometimes dream of.

Now we live solitary in the hills.
You no longer spend your days at work.
Discipline fails, we forget to wind the clock,
yard and house are a clutter of undone chores,
we never gather enough wood for winter.
Instead we wander through the woods
looking for manzanita or calypso,
any sign of spring. Moving
keeps us warm, and fallen wood of trees
that soaked up sunlight all those years
we hardly noticed that it fell on us.

Whale Watch at Bodega Head

How the wind cuts through
the layers we put on this morning
when we crept from warm beds,
trailing dreamweeds, leaving our lives
to stand at the edge of one element
and gaze into another. What are we
looking for in the fogged water?
Before it gets too cold to stay,
we want an answer. Among the rocks
waves surge, swirling green and white.
Gulls ride invisible currents, light
farther down the bluff. This could be
the headland where Coyote stood
to toss in the log the old ones say
became your living body.

Wind stiffens, driving us to seek
shelter and hot tea. As we turn away,
someone shouts, "She blows!" Over the sea
a white breath plumes the air,
plumes it again, again. A shining
black body breaches, flukes rise
and you go down. My blood races
to follow your warm blood
into the depths, into the dimmer light.
Cousin, though we may never meet or touch,
to share the same world and time
is miracle enough.

Hazel

We trudge up the canyon to look for wood
and find hazel nuts on slender shrubs
just a little higher than our heads.
The leaves are soft and delicately scented;
the husks leave nettles in our fingers.
As a child I always confused the hazel nut
with my cousin Hazel who lived in the woods
and knew the name of every herb
and what it cured—infection, fever, pain.
She used to witch wells for local ranchers
until she got too old and cross and strange.

Already next year's growth begins to form,
catkins pendent, wormlike, from scaly buds.
When nuts are out of reach, we bend the stems,
so flexible when young, their forks
noted for responsiveness to water.
In a little while we have a handful
of bony, crisp kernels rich as butter.
We forget the wood. It doesn't matter.
We often set out to look for one thing
and end by coming home with another.

Elegy for Young Firs

One by one the young firs come down.
With hardly a tremor they submit
to the chainsaw's loud bite.
Branches interlaced, they wait
as if they do not fully understand.
We tell them with a tug.
Obedient to the wedge of air we've cut,
they fall across the road.
In the sudden silence we are glad
they missed the roof, the power line,
the things we planned to save. Now
the windows and the shrubs below
will get more light, the house will be
safer if the nearby forest burns.
We know a dozen reasons, all good,
for having made this change.

Still, we pause a moment, not quite sure.
A quarter-century of growth is gone
in seconds at our hands. The raw
space needs to be explained
before we turn our minds
to other things.

Part III

Sleeping on the Terminal Moraine

The Salamander

Mottled as the leaves, it lay
motionless.
Its tapered, brown body seemed
carved from stone, the skin
drawn tight over a bony skull.
The filmed, protuberant eyes
were those of a thing born in the dark.
Traveling slowly with the chill
that creeps from the redwood canyon
into the oak woodland in December,
it had crawled from the creek bottom
just as its ancestor, *Diplovertebron*,
once crawled from the sea.

I knelt to pick it up.
Cold and heavy as a monument,
it switched its body back and forth,
hands and feet and elbows working hard,
giving a glimpse of marbled underparts
creekwater gray.
Its rough, sticky skin slimed my glove.
I put it down. It twitched away
on its annual trek to the top of the ridge—
ancient winter, ascendant on my hill.

Volume 99

One day my road will be impassable.
Slides on the grade, bridge out, no trail
that even a deer could navigate.
Lines down, no phone, lights,
heat or running water.
I'll slog through rainsoaked woods
breaking off small dead branches,
burn them at night to keep warm,
pick winter cress and lamb's quarters,
dig the bulb called Indian Potato,
fight gray squirrels for the hazel nuts,
talk to birds and trees and salamanders,
having no other live companionship.
When the vireo whistles,
I'll disinter my rosewood recorder
and play a kind of minor counterpoint,
not, as in the old days, madrigals,
but a weird new music all my own,
music to be alone by on my hill.

Then will you sit on the other side
wondering: does she survive,
is she ill or well, does she have food,
is her water pure, her Zinfandel gone,
is she still reading the Great Books . . .

Sawtooth

Old granite edge, old fractured bone
jutting from the body of the mountain,
you cut your shape on the diamond air.
Polished steel at dawn, by noon dazzling white,
when fire builds along the western sky
you absorb its rosy, dusty heat
as if you couldn't bear to let it go.
Earth goes dark, sky pales and cools,
still you hold that warmth like an ember,
hold it as the first stars wink on.
Only then I shift my gaze
to contemplate Vega and Altair,
to trace the Dipper's pointers to Polaris,
constant, faint above the canyon rim.

When I look back the alpenglow is gone.
Only a ghostly phosphorescence
sighs around you in the wash of stars.
I lie in a high mountain meadow
accustoming my eyesight to the dark,
looking away from any earthly light,
waiting for what comes next to begin.
Waiting for Cassiopeia in her chair.

Changing

It happens quietly. A maple seed
blown here by a sudden, random wind
sprouts beneath the bedroom wall,
grows before I quite know how it grew,
tops the eaves, seeking afternoon
as well as morning sun, and fills my life.
Leaves unfold like ragged green umbrellas
waiting for an April rain.

I tell myself it's just another tree
that could have been dug up when it was small
and planted farther from the house.
If I don't cut it soon, if I keep on
watching while it reaches for the sky,
delighting in its gray, sinewy trunk,
the soft touch of leaves when I walk by,
the way it gathers light on winter days
and pours it generously through the glass,
it won't be long until it moves
my house off its foundation.

The room is full of curious, precious things,
skin of mole, hawk feathers, moth cocoons,
deer's-foot rattle, dry seed pods
of zygadene, racemes of saxifrage.
And now across the walls maple leaves
sign to me in shadows. Though the tree
is not yet in the room, in the dark
I hear it whisper, know it's coming in.

Petitioning

All afternoon I sit in a shopping mall
gathering signatures to Save Our Farmlands.
Under the tile, under the parking lot
is earth once rooted with an orchard
whose clean fragrance I remember well.

Warmed by the mock sunshine of windows
blooming with towels, dishes, comforters,
herds of human cattle drift across
a tile floor like the grid of subdivisions.
Stunted trees uniformly sprout
from planters, imitation wooden lamp posts
grow between the benches. Far above
sky and cloud snow through tinted glass
like bad reception on TV. Immaculate
cleaning men with chromed carts
spray the tired air with apple blossom.

Putting the Garden to Bed

Mid-October. The weatherman
predicts dropping temperatures,
snow level at two thousand feet.
Every year I face the same
dilemma: put the garden down
cleanly, like an old dog? or wait
till every fruit is stiff with frost?
This year I'll put the soil to sleep,
sow it with a cover crop of rye,
bury it under a blanket of manure.
I pull down beans, pick tomatoes green,
rip the stout vines up. I thought
after I set them out they'd never grow.
Roots were busy with a feast
I hadn't faith to set the table for.

A light rain has left the earth
soft enough to turn. An old
gravedigger bending to my task,
I shovel myself warm. When I stop
the sun's behind the firs. I'm cold.
It's later than I thought.

The Day the Clock Stopped

Overcome by age, the electric clock
finally stops at twenty after four.
Ailing—or dead? Trying to make it live,
I jiggle its brittle loops of wire.
In *rigor mortis* the hands remain
folded, one over the other.
As if preparing a body for the grave,
I carefully wash the clock, wash
the dark spot it left upon the wall,
a shadow that refuses to disperse.
Strung on habit, my eyes return to it
as they used to turn to Mother's chair.
Should I be hungry? Is the moussaka done?
Isn't it time, now, to go to bed?
For weeks I am not quite able
to operate without that plain face,
those sure hands to tell me what to do.

Then one day my eyes become windows
revealing how time passes away
without sound, without visible movement.
The tanbark oak has grown a green halo.
Light climbs daily to the tips of firs,
every tree creates its annual ring.
That night I stare beyond the galaxy
into depths where distant stars
reach toward earth from time out of mind.

At the Planning Commission

That it should come to this—that we
movers of earth, cutters of trees,
polluters of springs and streams
should sit in a heated public room
deciding where fences shall be run
over the unresisting land,
decreeing where power lines shall go
and houses of the rich be planted!
In the beam of the overhead projector
a French-curve map stains the wall,
lots laid out like steaks and chops
on a butcher's cutting chart.
I've seen this mountain in another light,
toothed with the quiet symmetry of firs,
after a night when deer and fox and owl
fed and went to sleep, coyote's song
brought the dark alive and skunk
left a subtle warning on the wind.

Restlessly I cross my legs, uncross them.
I have had my say. Now it is up to the five
behind microphones at the front of the room,
visibly tired, thinking of dinner,
craving a cigarette, a coffee break.
I forgot to tell them about the salamanders,
dark as chocolate, torpid with cold,
that move up the mountain about this time
every year, how easy it is to drive
right over them if you are unaware.
I forgot to tell them about the golden eagle
that clings to the top of the transmission tower,
feathers in blue air, talons clutching metal,
half in his world, half in one we made.

Joy

Surveying my garden in a dry spring,
peppers retarded, tomatoes anemic,
peas rushing to tough pod,
squash an unknown quantity for summer,
artichoke (only one) peering up
spitefully through gray spikes,
insects ominous, each a potential disaster,
my eye falls at last on the young
uncomplicated lettuce, yellow-green,
bursting the bounds of its modest bed,
holding back nothing for tomorrow,
insisting it be eaten now, enjoyed
at once and to the full without thought,
without plan, fruit of a careless handful
of seed thrown out on winter ground,
needing only a small rain, a bit of sun,
and a great appetite for what is alive
and can be taken on the spot,
an excess to be given freely away!

The Careful Years

Halfway through June of a year when
rain stopped early and Farewell-to-Spring
rushed to seed, I wake and hear
vireos, song sparrows, spotted towhees.
The sun will soon be up again, and hot,
wilting leaves, turning them dry and brown,
threatening my own skin. How careful
we learn to be if we survive past sixty
to shield ourselves from too much sun,
to exercise enough to keep the heart
circulating blood through arteries
to brains that more and more refuse
to yield up memory at will. All week
I have tried to learn to hate you
because I need you and you stay away
and never call or write even though
once I thought we were the best of friends.
That was before I learned to be careful
whom I cared about, or why. Dear God,
if I must now always choose
the sensible shoe, the diet of less red meat,
let me at least abandon care in dreams,
where there should be no dry season, ever.

Ano Nuevo

Curious how we choose the shortest days,
the longest nights to begin again,
to look like Janus backward, forward.

Why not July, afternoons
warm and long, the nights to come
soft and wrapped in flowers?

So many difficulties wait for winter,
wishful hearing, all but vanished sight,
the not-to-be-depended-upon body,

foolishness, failures of compassion,
past tenderness like dead bouquets,
memory confused by many summers.

Then we hope for less and less:
no longer for a world at peace,
only for a world not quite at war;

not for a presence, but perhaps a letter;
instead of a true vision, a momentary
glimpse of light through a prism.

No wonder we dream of another hemisphere
where blindfold angels break pinatas,
causing an excited scramble.

Going Away: an Ode to the House

As if performing a burial ritual,
we provision the van with food, music,
whatever we might need where we are going.
We pause, suddenly more in love than ever
with the familiar walls that hem us in,
orb weavers' webs above the doors,
mud-daubers' nests under the eaves,
conduits of carpenter bees in the siding.
Inside, the worn Chinese rugs,
purples and blues still rich and beautiful,
sturdy, battered furniture handed down
for generations, light shining through
blue and amber and green bottles,
pretty junk beside incredible treasures,
fossils and dried flowers and roadside weeds,
drawings of native plants and blue herons,
a carved one taking flight from the piano,
the warm, comforted bed, the cold mirror,
its dream-trees lashed by wind.

When we are gone, the lichens on that fir
will reflect light in this particular way,
bracken ferns will flicker like green flames,
the salamander will leave the box he's under
to wander back to the creek and breed more young.
The thrush that haunts shadows near the house
will stay or not, be eaten by cats or sing
all summer, the small flycatcher
may return to the nest, red columbine
will bloom or die, and the young maple
will probably top the ridgepole. The creek,
reduced from basso profundo to busy chatter,
will run out of things to say in April
and lapse into its annual summer silence.
Before we even leave for our winter trip,
I catch myself longing for our return.

Lesson One

The smallest flycatcher, the *Empidonax*,
chose to build her nest
on the rolled-up blind above the door.
It suffers a minor earthquake
each time we enter or leave the house.
Still, the site has advantages:
it is well hidden from jays;
for a perch, the clothesline's handy,
and the slim branches of the maple
that grows outside the window.
I watch her from there sometimes.
She hops, nervous, from branch to branch,
flipping her tail for balance.
She stares with enormous eyes
set in a small, pointed head, looking
not too bright, terribly suspicious,
like some humans I know who have
no more reason to trust God
than she to trust me. For am I not
one of the breed that levels land
and destroys trees, that burns forests
and drives other creatures out
to protect cats and roses?
That starves its young, betrays its kind,
and blows up great parts of the world
where birds will sing no more?
That devises cunning cruelties
for reasons no one understands?
My complex hands could unroll the blind
to let her eggs tip out and smash,
toss her nest into the fire
or save it to show the children.

Day by day the maple leaves
reach to shelter the nest.
Quietly I creep in and out
to hang my wash at the line's end.
She sits on the nest doggedly,
taking a chance, tail raised

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like a tiny flag of truce.
Together we grow into a web,
fragile, dangerous, but with a design
that slowly etches into our memories.
Something we could make happen again.

Sleeping on the Terminal Moraine

An avalanche of moonlight buries the stars,
frosts the domes, whitens the sandy road.
Where I sleep—or rather, where I lie,
moonrise-to-moonset lover of this place,
breathing in its monardella scent,
learning the texture of its granite skin,
memorizing every cleft and line,
too delirious to close my eyes—
where I lie is where a glacier paused.
Now the moraine has grown itself a cover,
a species of willow, creeping manzanita,
mountain heather, buckwheat, penstemon.

The moon sets, the stars revive, and one
planet, the brightest object in the sky,
shines with a reassuring steadiness.
Still, after the moon's warm alpenglow,
these new fires seem cold and far away,
may not be there at all, may only be
chips in the universal memory.

Earth continues rolling eastwardly,
my transient breath is swept swiftly by,
gradually the sky begins to pale.
Determined to catch nature in the act,
I concentrate upon a visible star,
lose and find, lose and find again.
A sudden wind ruffles the tallest fir—
or is it the birds waking all at once?
In the second it takes to look and look back
the star is gone. I have fallen for
the oldest trick of all, sleight of hand.

The sun wakes me, hot on my face.
I will be your permanent star, it says,

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you can count on me. I will be back
every day for a few more million years
and faithfully hide myself from you each night
so you won't tire of me or burn your eyes
with too much ardent staring. You are the one
who will pale and fade away and disappear.

Part IV
Exploring Death Valley

Moving

You rush to catch a bus or plane,
not looking back, not wanting to.
The room you leave was only a place
to make the best of, a body inherited
from some unknown ancestor,
too large or small for your dreams.
Later you recall an accident,
empty hangers jangling in a closet,
a song they played that year on the radio,
a quarrel, green bottles in the window,
source of all the room's light and dust.
A silence not quite like any other.

You drive at dusk along a winter highway,
see small houses near the road,
each spilling its light like a lamp.
Briefly you wonder what goes on inside,
people making love or quarreling,
rooted there or waiting to move on
like the restless stranger passing by.

In a cabin high on the mountain
someone reads or writes or plays the piano,
simply alone, content to be alone.
Before you reach this altitude
how many lonely miles you have to drive
between one empty room and another

Dirge for Submersible Pump

The pump went out today.
Over the spot where it is buried
I listen for its rhythm.
I took that steady throb for granted.
Strange to open the tap and hear
a ghostly sigh, the last breath
of an entity that made life possible,
voice of a rusty artery
through which vital fluid flowed
to the circulatory system of my house.
How long such water lies beneath the ground
is anyone's guess—long enough
to absorb iron and calcium from rock
and suspend it in a rich brew
that stains sinks and clogs plumbing.

Deep under the earth in an aquifer
where storms of winters past gather,
gather and flow, a hidden river
accessible only through a strenuous effort,
an act of faith, like some difficult love
we cannot see but must believe is there
because instinct forks us to it.
For that water we spend all we have
even though we know that it can leave
a taste of earth and iron in our mouths.

Kneeling by a Raised Bed

Crumbling moist soil into loam,
surprising pink and purple worms
half-in, half-out of tunnels,
I sense that caring for this earth,
this small piece of world I've come to love,
may be as close to prayer as I can get.
Here I admit no man-made machines
to tear the quiet or the soil apart.
The silence of my single presence
draws to the compost pile a mild towhee
poking patiently to fill her needs
like a bag lady in a garbage dump,
draws a sparrow to light above my head
and sing to life's perennial return.
Bowing over a handful of earth,
I smell the rich complexities of mold,
of mysteries I'll never understand—
worlds within worlds within my hand.

Pinnacle Gulch, Minus Tide

The sea withdraws, defenses down,
secrets open on the strand.
Black rocks, shiny-wet,
studded with snails, limpets,
barnacles. Muddy forests
of sea anemones absorbing
food in blue-green jelly mouths.
Sea palm in slippery clumps,
orange, red, and purple stars.
A hermit crab waves its legs
from an oliva shell.

We see a worn tire wedged
between two rocks, seaweed twined
around a yellow plastic rope,
bits of green and brown bottles
ground to a smooth edge,
ships' spars with rusty spikes,
beer cans, a few odd shoes.
Knowing the absentminded sea
will soon rush back to claim
its abandoned treasures,
reluctantly we trudge to shore,
adding our temporary tracks
to those of sanderlings and gulls.

Sailing Around Angel Island

The island was there, but the angels were absent,
on a journey, perhaps, to another sphere,
anyway, nowhere to be seen on or off
the mound of brown land looming ahead.
No angels, either, in the sky. Only gulls
teetering on bent wings, making the most
of a weak breeze that barely puffed our sails.
Between turns at the tiller,
which trembled slightly at the sluggish
sucking of a current in the straits,
we probed the opaque water with our eyes,
wondering how deep it was, what lay
beneath its gray-green skin. Seals
that bobbed nearby could have told us,
or pelicans gliding just above the waves,
or the still heron fishing by the rocks.
But we were strangers here today
and didn't speak the language. Not until
we rounded the point, steering by Alcatraz,
did we loosen lines and collapse our white wings—
the closest things to angels we encountered.

Powerless now, we drifted on the bay,
waiting for the motor to take hold.
A perpetual mirage, the gray city
floated in the distance; two bridges
fenced us into a calm pasture.
In that suspended space we felt
spellbound, attuned to all that breathed
below us and around us and above,
sensitive to the slightest tremor,
ready for some clear communication
we sensed was imminent. Suddenly
the motor started with a dry stutter.
In control again, we headed home,

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thinking how journeys often differ
from what we had expected them to be
and end by bringing us back to ourselves.

Exploring Death Valley

1. Into the Dark

We step out of the van in Tehachapi,
our feet on frozen ground.
Shivering in the motel's panel ray,
we survey the dismal bed, crooked drapes,
the tall, ornate lamp that won't light.
Prisoners' families and friends
slept here, closed in by these walls.
All night freight trains lumber by,
shaking the earth under us and moaning.
We sleep like the dead in spite of everything.
When we travel on next day the Brandenburg
effervesces on tape like a hidden spring.
Mountains close us off on the west,
a blue wall with snow-spattered peaks.
Creosote bush, stiff Joshua tree
seem at home on the rolling gray land.
Just as dark begins to settle down
we reach the valley floor at Stovepipe Wells,
a camp laid out in rows like a cemetery.
In winter old folks drag themselves here
to join a climax population of ravens.

2. In the Rain Shadow

Salt flats, Bad Water, barren dunes—
what am I doing here, why have I come,
daughter of fog-shrouded coastal valleys?
So much sun hurts me, hurts my eyes.
Feeling its harsh touch through my shirt,
I seek out any bush or tree,
even if it offers little shade.
At least my mind can focus on a few
dry, leathery leaves or gray needles.
They say mesquite lives a thousand years,
outlives animals that come and go.
What would it be like to be
the oldest thing alive, to look

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gray and motionless and dull
while deep within your dry husk
life ticked away the centuries?

3. Salt Creek

From dry earth it rises, disappears
once again into dry earth.
Life forms of earlier times have vanished,
all save one, the rare, endangered pupfish.
Here it survives, lurking under rocks,
darting out to scare off other fish
or feed on certain insects. Landlocked
in less than three miles of shallow stream,
it changed its needs to fit its circumstance,
a world shrunk to a thin, salty thread.
I think of my father, breathing through a tube
the precious oxygen his body craved,
selling the boat he used to fish the lake.

4. Mirage

Hundreds of feet below the old surface,
I creep like some salt-tolerant bug
across the bed of a fossil lake,
trying to remember ancient winds
that slanted waves across an element
where now ravens are the only swimmers.
As low here as I'll ever be,
I have no place to look but up,
up the fault scarp at the water mark
the level of the lake once reached,
a dim record, nothing but a shadow.
Once I thought mountains never changed.
Now I face a block-faulting floor,
hearts of mountains melting into fans,
identical substance, ever-shifting form.
I stare for minutes at a mist rising,
mist with its suggestion of a cool,
gray coastal fog. Oh, heavenly!

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I even start to taste its iodine breath
when suddenly I realize Badwater
has played a trick on me—not ocean mist,
only reflected cloud! Furious,
I dig my hands into the alkali
and fling it into the air, making my own
blinding, stifling cloud.
After the crashing in my ears subsides,
faint laughter, trickling into the ground.
Oh God, if this is all there is,
let it at least be real.

5. Ghost Flowers

In spite of what they promised me,
there are no flowers here.
It must be too early or too late.
Perhaps it was a dry winter.
In the desert seeds wait their chance,
rush to sudden growth after a rain.
Some outwait a disappointing spring
to germinate in fall. Others
wait all their lives to come to life.
Ghost Flowers, Fivespot, Purple Mat—
I see them even when they are not here.
Or are they always here, like the stars,
only the light hides them from our eyes?

6. The Castle

They are all dead now—the millionaire,
his intellectual wife, the Indians,
even the amusing scoundrel Scotty.
We wander through their lives like maggots,
sucking on every sort of privacy.
Don't worry, Bessie, the heavy drapes
are always drawn against the strong light;
visitors are not allowed to tread
on the handsome Spanish rugs or sit
where once you and your guests sat, alive.

*

No one touches, ever, the grand pianos
except to dust, except the female ranger
who gives a white-gloved version of Chopin.
The redwood ceilings are lovely, I admit,
although it makes me sad to know the trees
were sacrificed to give acoustic pleasure
to you who couldn't even play or sing.

But I forgive you. The Shoshone baskets
lining the shelves of your sitting room
shine like ancient sunlight through the minds
and willow-wise hands of their makers.
In the dim light bulrush roots and stalks
issue a tender fragrance. Chuckawalla
and desert tortoise live in the designs.

Barbara Meyn was born in 1923 on her grandfather's farm south of Ukiah, California, into a family that had migrated from Maryland to Kentucky, Indiana, and Iowa before the westward movement carried it to the Pacific Coast in the 1850's.

Growing up in Ukiah and in Eureka, on the north coast, she attended Humboldt State College and University of California at Berkeley, where she received her B.A. in English and studied poetry composition with the late Josephine Miles.

At various times newspaperwoman, teacher, and free-lance writer, Barbara now lives on Humbug Creek in northeastern Sonoma County with her husband, a retired Santa Rosa Junior College vocal-choral instructor. They have two sons and three grandchildren.

Once an editorial assistant for **Loon**, Barbara presently helps edit **Green Fuse**, a poetry journal dedicated to the preservation of the planet. Her poems have appeared in several small magazines, and her self-published first book, **Blue Heron on Humbug Creek**, was printed in 1981 by Calliopeia Press. She has given readings at Santa Rosa Junior College and on radio KPFA in Berkeley.

Barbara has been an environmental activist for many years and helped to found the Environmental Center of Sonoma County.

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